

THE PSYCHOLOGY  
OF THE  
PERSONAL INTERVIEW

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VON KLEINSMID





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# *The Psychology of the Personal Interview; Its Relation to Moral Development Through Penal Institutions*

*By*

Rufus Bernhard von KleinSmid  
Associate Superintendent and Director of  
the Department of Research, Indiana  
Reformatory, Jeffersonville.

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TRADE SCHOOL



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N times past, the term "criminal class" has meant all things to all people, and yet, in the mind of everyone making use of the term, there seemed to dwell the idea that there existed in all persons so classified, a disposition to disregard the laws of society and the rights of the individual; an analysis of the conditions in order that the cause for such disposition might be revealed, is rather a late consideration, and even now, except in one or two institutions for criminals where the whole problem is being studied from a psychological standpoint, it is a general belief that that cause is to be discovered in social conditions alone. A new conception, however, of the nature of the so-called criminal class is bound to arise when we are forced to acknowledge that a certain considerable percentage of such persons are defective delinquents, i. e., insane, including alcoholics, drug fiends, epileptics and feeble-minded—idiots, imbeciles and morons. These persons, as is true of the remaining members of the class, have been convicted of criminal acts and yet, in the very nature of the case, must have committed their crimes under disabilities which rendered them both careless and incapable of making the necessary effort to live a life of integrity and regard for law.

While it is quite impossible to estimate the number of defective delinquents in the criminal class with the meagre data at hand, it is not so difficult to esti-

mate quite closely the percentage of those among such of the criminals as have been received at the penal and correctional institutions if observations made in a few prisons and reformatories are indicative and at all reliable. The reports from seven such institutions show results ranging from twenty to sixty per cent. of the entire inmate population, while the files of the psychological laboratory at the Indiana Reformatory warrant the conclusion that at least one half of the entire inmate population are not mentally responsible, or at least are so mentally affected as to be "incapable of competing on equal terms with their normal fellows, or of managing themselves or their affairs with ordinary prudence." This condition of affairs then throws a new light on the entire question of criminology, and adds greatly to the difficulties of handling to advantage those so-called criminals confined within the boundaries of our institutions. The problems of the hospitals for the insane and the custodial institutions for the feeble-minded are those applying in a large number of cases here, and sooner or later, it will be necessary for our commonwealths to effect such segregation as will enable them to deal with this portion of our criminals to much better advantage than is possible under such organization among penal institutions as now exists in most states. Were there no other consideration of justice or equity, the tremendous economic waste which takes place in attempting to expend upon those incapable of profiting by it to any great extent the same benefits of that elaborate equipment which is brought to bear upon those whom we hope to develop physically, mentally and morally, is in itself scarcely less than a criminal

squandering of energy, time and money. It is true, that from this portion of the criminal class society must be protected; on the other hand, society must exercise humane and careful treatment. Therefore, in order that society may be protected such individuals must remain permanently under custodial care, and in order that such may receive fitting treatment, arrangements must be made to provide for them such proper influences in mental and physical exercise as will enable them to live as independently, helpfully and happily within their limitations as may be possible. When this shall have been done, we shall have accomplished all that may be under the circumstances. Quite clearly the problem here is not one of reformation. Any officer of a penal institution whose labor includes the interviewing of inmates at his or their request must realize what a useless effort it is to attempt to fit the advice and sympathetic planning called for by the condition under which the institution must work to the more nearly normal inmate and the defective delinquent alike, and since it is coming to be generally recognized by those who make a scientific study of the situation that the defective delinquent is in the wrong place in the penal and correctional institution as best organized today, it seems to me that one of two things must be done: either such inmates as are quite hopelessly subnormal must be removed to some other institution where they can be handled scientifically under the right kind of influences, or must be segregated in our penal institutions in such manner as to allow of special treatment differing from that accorded the more nearly normal inmate. These of more nearly normal mentality are they for whom the reformatory

as such really should exist. To such as these, it is possible to uphold moral standards, and urge individual effort toward their realization, with some hope of at least such a degree of progress toward virtue as will make it not only safe but wise to return them to society. Sociologists seem to agree with the consensus of criminologists that society has all that it has a right to expect when those who have broken the law are removed and incarcerated. In other words, when society is amply protected, she has no right to demand more, since, to a certain extent at least, society does deserve the criminals which she produces. On the other hand, it is to be said that if these erring members are ever to be returned to former conditions, it is reasonable on the part of society to expect that such influences as may be brought to bear upon these individuals during their terms of sentence should serve to make them morally independent before they are released from the custody of the state's penal institutions. This fact suggests, as Dr. Peyton puts it, that the more nearly the influences operative on the inside, and the more nearly the daily experience of the inmate while there, can be made to conform to the conditions which that inmate must meet necessarily in society on the outside, the greater the chances of the institution to succeed in its reformative work, and this argues the necessity of that relationship of confidence and trust between officer and inmate as makes possible the frank exchange of ideas. Hence, the absolute necessity of the interview as a means of moral development. Moral weakness argues either a lack of judgment or a weakness or perversion of will, but where will strives together in harmony with judgment we have

an effort on the part of the individual which must be called morality. Judgment is based upon experience, and is, in the large percentage of cases among the inmates of our institutions, practically unsound. On the other hand, a goodly percentage know vastly better than they will to do, and out of this situation the singularity of our method is absolutely imperative to success. Inmates of our institutions never were and never can be reformed "en masse." Where purpose is wrong, it is the wrong purpose of the individual; where misunderstanding exists it is the misunderstanding of the individual first of all. Where injustice is felt, where hatred and resentment are entertained, these rankle in the mind of the individual. That explanation which clears the atmosphere for the individual, spreads its clarifying power over the mass. Hope planted in the life of the individual causes the mass to look up, while hate turned to faith in the heart of a single inmate tends to redeem as many as that inmate may touch. We may address the whole population assembled never so clearly and never so earnestly, but it is the old story of the other fellow being hit. For success in the development of moral standards, I can see no escape from the personal interview.

Two phases of the situation always present themselves; the side of the officer who sees the necessity of understanding the inmate, and of being understood by him, and the side of the inmate who has something in his system, to relieve himself of which he seeks an opportunity, and wants to be understood; here then, the call for the practice of that consummate art of "getting together." No

place here for the superficial; no place for the introduction of the merely conventional; no room for the artificial and the make-believe, and surely no excuse for the presence of a substitute. The greatest force of all is the personal element. The inmate who writes for an interview with the state agent is not satisfied to meet his clerk; if he expects to talk with the physician, he does not want to be confronted by the head nurse; and if summoned in response to his request to see the general superintendent, he regards with the keenest disappointment the absence of that dignitary and the presence of the chaplain. What is wanted is the personal touch—at once the greatest opportunity and the greatest obligation, and, to the scientist in this field the greatest privilege. Look sensibly with me at the situation: The medical expert must diagnose his case in the singular and so must the psychologist, and he and not a substitute must make the examination and consider the symptoms. True there are certain general characteristics in all cases of fever, but it will not do to treat all cases alike nor to practice upon the single case from the basis of general observation. It is trite to say that the psychologist finds no two cases alike, though all cases may bear marked similarities; and yet the determining peculiarities are so subtly hid and so cunningly disguised as to call for the keenest differentiation. A case or two in point: In the midst of a heavy morning's labor there came a request for an interview from Shanahan who worked in the foundry. I had seen him a score of times among the men, and had observed him in the chapel audience as many more. His case seemed to reveal few peculiarities among those of his class except that

his record may have been less promising for reform and more extensive in the variety of crimes than others. He belonged to a family commonly known in the territory in which they live as the "dirty dozen." A younger brother too was an inmate of the institution at this time. In response to his "rush" request to see me I sent for him, and when he stood before me, a veritable giant in strength and a potential devil in passion, I could think at first of nothing other than the splendid work which nature had done in tracing in the outlines of his face the map of "old Ireland." His story was to the effect that a floor mate had insulted him by reflecting on the good name of his mother and including other members of the family in his wholesale slur against the entire "dozen." This Shanahan could not and would not stand, and if it were repeated, he believed he could not restrain himself from killing the offender. He confessed to no objections to having thrown up to him his own meanness—he acknowledged serving other sentences in many parts of the country for most heinous crimes—but when it came to reflecting upon the good name of his mother and sisters, this was more than his control would bear. His anger and his weakness in the face of all of the conditions during his rehearsal of the taunts he had endured, led to the intensest weeping, and all broken with sobs, again and again he bemoaned the necessity of killing, and begged me to do something to prevent his "losing out." And here is the point in the case—not because he did not wish to add another crime to his already long list, but because another crime and one committed in the institution would likely lead to the transfer of the inmate to the state prison three

hundred miles away where he could no longer see that younger brother three times each day though the width of the great dining room separates them at such times, and he could no longer receive visits from his two sisters who lived but twenty minutes ride from the reformatory gates. "Oh! don't transfer me," he cried again and again. "If I can no longer see my brother every morning to know that he is well—if I can no longer see him march in line every evening to know that he has passed another day without getting into trouble, I shall want to die." He never held a conversation with his brother, but only saw him at a distance, and yet the day's beginning and its ending were rendered both tolerable and satisfying because of this great privilege. And when he left me with the promise to try to hold himself together long enough to rush over to my office should provocation prove too much for him another time, I knew that if reform were among the possibilities for that man, I now held the key to its accomplishment.

And again: A letter which ran: Dear Professor: Would you kindly come over and give me a chance to explain myself? I would like to have a good hearth to hearth talk with you," took me to the door of No. 8 in the special restraint cell-block to face a man so feared and distrusted by the officers of the institution as to lead to his being incarcerated in a cell for four months without association with the officers or the other inmates. An assault upon an officer with intent to kill had brought upon his head such punishment as served to keep him in the hospital for many days. Originally he had come from Chicago where he was a member of a band of thugs

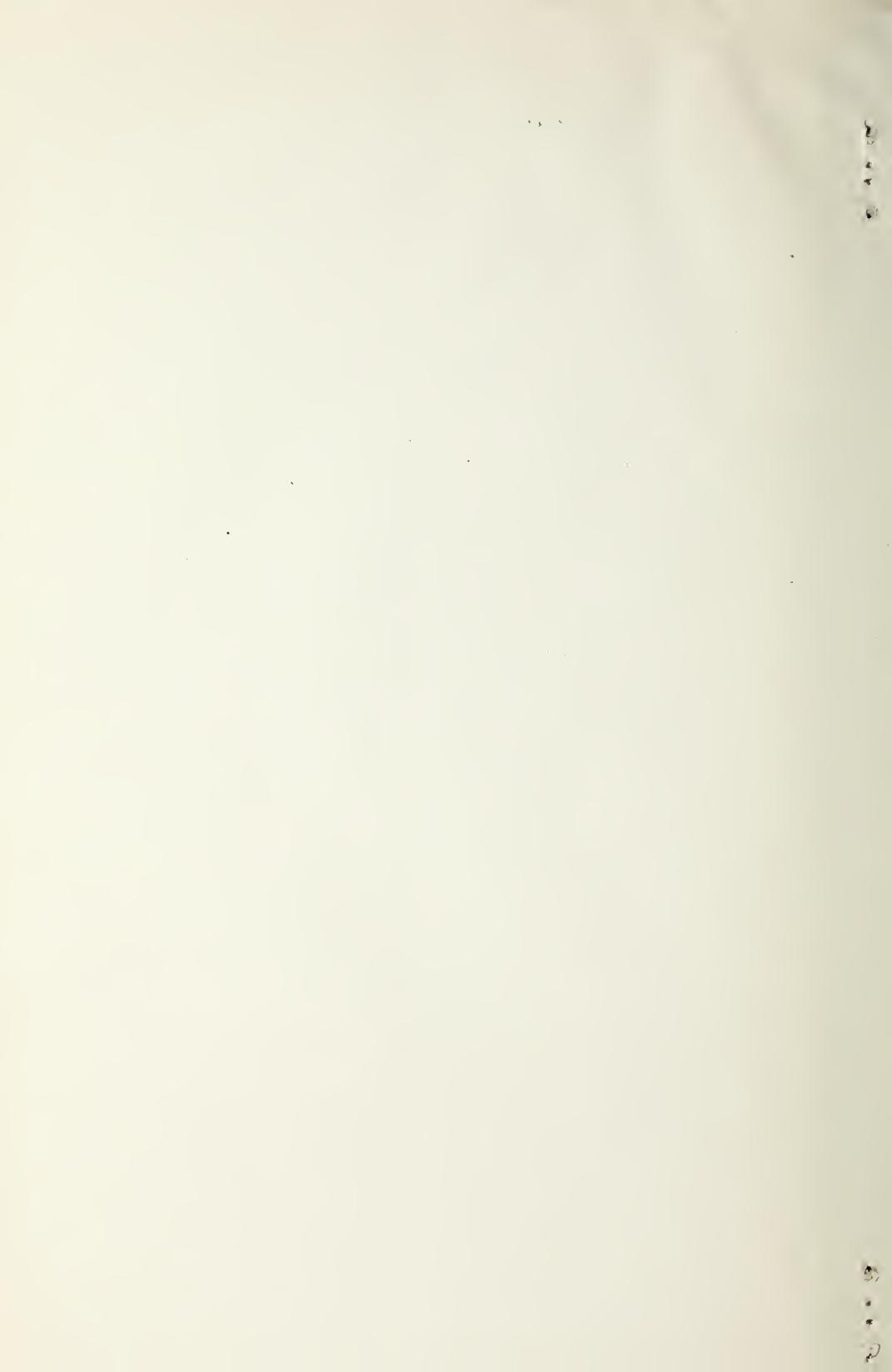
that through the years had carried on a business of great profit to themselves and of mystery to the police. I had passed his door almost daily for weeks with a casual inquiry or a mere "Hello!" and all of this time I had hoped to bring about the above request without suggesting it in words, and now that it had come, I listened to stories of vilest experiences and of the wildest education in crime that I had ever come upon, and in it all not one word of complaint nor one word of hope. I guessed at a longing simply because of the request for an interview. He told me how his brother, much older than himself had come home from serving a sentence in the state penitentiary, and had schooled him in the method of breaking prison rules and of fooling the "screws," and how, seemingly, it had never occurred to him that any other than a life of crime was possible or desirable for him. He had fed on the excitement of anticipating and practicing the long catalog of crimes. His detection, his conviction and his sentence were but what he had expected at first. Quite persistently he clung to the statement that he must always be a thug and, in fact, had no desire to be anything else; yet the tone and the attitude behind the braggart and the bully revealed the slightest wish to be something else. Finally we discovered it, he and I together, away down under the rubbish of twenty-eight years of evil teaching, the genuine hope that better things were possible for him. At first it was expressed in the wish that I should understand him, but finally just before his transfer to the penitentiary in a hand clasp and a set of the jaw that gave strength and genuineness to his promise to try to make good. Innumerable instances

could be cited and experiences with these men rehearsed, all of which would go to show that moral development among the men of this class is possible only upon the same psychological foundation as moral development with any other class. Hope, desire and struggle for mastery are all in the first person singular number. Where judgment has been created through lifelong education among anti-social influences, it is not to be expected that the social judgment among these men will be sound, but where intelligence sufficient exists, it is not impossible to correct their misconceptions, and to create a sense of such appreciation of the best in organized society as will challenge their support and get it. It requires, however, the slow, patient, painstaking personal work of the teacher with his students to bring this about. In many cases, the life has been one of the most pronounced selfishness, with practically every action prompted by the individualistic instinct. The will, too, is weak and perverted. To will to do the right and the unselfish thing when the habitual reactions of life have all strengthened him in the contrary attitude, is not an easy task, and the struggle calls for the most sympathetic encouragement on the part of one who seeks to understand the conflict going on in the heart of the individual. This is not a claim for sentimental consideration, nor cheap sympathy. The building of the moral character calls for stout and sturdy stuff, and these men should be made to realize that the success of their attempt at reconstruction is largely in their own hands, yet the situation does call for that sympathy and understanding on the part of those who come in contact with these men in an authoritative way which shall

serve to inspire rather than to discourage the continued effort. It is not a new problem, but simply the old problem to be worked out under this new conception. I should despair of moral reformation on any other grounds than the purely personal, and I know of no method of procedure which would bring about the desired results as quickly and as certainly as those which are operative in the personal interview.











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